

Note

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THE CAJUNS OF EAST TEXAS¹

by

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RÉSUMÉ

Dean R. LOUDER et Micheal LEBLANC : Les Cadjins de l'Est du Texas.

Bien que les contacts français avec le Texas remontent à 300 ans, il n'y a eu peuplement permanent de la part des francophones que depuis le début du 20^e siècle. À ce moment-là des travailleurs ruraux fuyant une situation économique néfaste en Louisiane traversent la rivière Sabine et s'implantent dans les prairies le long des principales artères joignant Houston à Beaumont. Peu de temps après, l'installation de raffineries de pétrole dans la région du Golden Triangle attire d'autres Cadjins de l'état voisin. La migration ralentit durant la période de la Crise, mais se réamorçait de plus bel au moment de la deuxième guerre mondiale alors que de nouvelles industries de guerre s'implantent à Port Arthur. Aujourd'hui cette population cadjine, surtout urbaine, est de moins en moins consciente des différences entre elle et la population américaine en général. Trois associations ont été fondées dans le but de maintenir et de promouvoir l'identité ethnique et l'utilisation du français.

MOTS-CLÉS : Cadjin, Texas, assimilation, migration

ABSTRACT

Although French contacts with Texas go back 300 years, the first permanent mass settlement by francophones began at the turn of the twentieth century when a class of rural migrant workers spilled across the Sabine River from Louisiana settling the open prairies along the principal transportation routes between Beaumont and Houston. Shortly thereafter, the establishment of oil refineries in the Golden Triangle area attracted other Cajuns. Following a momentary pause during the depression years, migration picked up once again as numerous war related industries developed in the Port Arthur area. Today the primarily urban Cajun population of East Texas is less and less conscious of its ethnic differences with mainstream America. Three different associations have been formed to maintain and promote ethnic identity and the use of French.

KEY WORDS: Cajun, Texas, assimilation, migration

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* *

The existence of French contacts with the territory that is today Texas go back almost three hundred years. Robert Caveliersieur de Lasalle, great French explorer and discoverer of the Mississippi River system, died near Matagorda Bay on the Texas gulf coast in 1687, unable to relocate the River's mouth, a victim of the mutiny of his men (Dufour, 1967, p. 18). Three decades later the intrepid French-Canadian Louis Juchereau de St-Denis founded the first military post and colonial settlement in Louisiana near Natchitoches, just fifteen miles from the presidio of Los Adaes, the easternmost outpost of Spanish Texas. The post served as a bulwark against Spanish aggression into Louisiana and as a convenient base for furtive trade between the two nations (Mills, 1977, p. 1; Casanova, 1976, p. 112). Other French speaking populations residing near the Texas-Louisiana border in the years prior to the Civil War have been documented (Olmsted, 1860), but the first permanent mass settlement in Texas by francophones did not occur until the beginning of the twentieth century when migrants, in great numbers, spilled across the Sabine River from Louisiana to the Golden Triangle cities of Port Arthur, Orange, and Beaumont and to such nearby villages and hamlets as China, Hamshire, Winnie, Fannett, Stowell, Raywood, Ames, and Liberty. The purpose of this paper is to examine the factors underlying this population shift and to document the persistence of Cajun ethnic consciousness in east Texas today. Before so doing, however, it is appropriate to summarize graphically the current situation of the French speaking population of Texas².

POPULATION OF FRENCH MOTHER TONGUE, 1970

Owing undoubtedly to its geographic proximity and strong historical and political ties to Mexico, the hispanophone population numbering at least 2 000 000 is by far the most important minority in Texas. There is, however, a small corner of the Lone Star State bordering Louisiana where French speakers are five times as numerous as Spanish. It is Jefferson county which includes most of the Golden Triangle conurbation, an area of approximately four hundred square miles, encompassing three major cities, Beaumont, Port Arthur, and Orange (figures 1 to 4). An equally large number is present in Harris county (essentially the city of Houston) but represent a much weaker percentage of the total (table 1). Quite naturally, the growth of other major urban centres outside the Golden Triangle—Galveston—Houston axis has, in recent years, attracted many francophones to them: Bexar (San Antonio), Dallas, and Tarrant (Fort Worth). In the rural counties of Chambers and Liberty, especially the former, the French population represents a significant proportion of the county total but a fairly weak share of the total Texas French mother tongue population. Of note also is the fact that of the one hundred urban places of 10 000 to 50 000 population in Texas, only five have French mother tongue populations of at least 500. Four are in the Golden Triangle (Groves, 2425; Nederland, 1470; Port Neches, 1445; Orange, 1742) and the other near Houston (Baytown, 896).

Published mother tongue data aggregated at the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) level are classed as to "native born" or "foreign born". Examination of the three "most French" SMSA's in Texas, reveal that the relative proportion of foreign born is not appreciable (table 2). Clearly less than three percent of the French mother tongue population in urban east Texas was born abroad. The figure is barely five percent for the state as a whole (table 3). Obviously the foreign born element is even smaller in rural Texas where French speakers are present. The Beaumont-Port-Arthur-Orange SMSA is the most French urban area in Texas, both absolutely and relatively; Port Arthur is the city in which francophones constitute the largest proportion of the population (14 percent)³.

Table 1

**Texas counties comprising over 1 000
French Mother Tongue Speakers, 1970**

	No	% of total county population	% of total state French mother tongue population		No	% of total county population	% of total state French mother tongue population
Bexar	4 695	*	5,2	Jefferson ...	24 049	9,8	26,7
Brazoria	1 243	1,1	1,4	Liberty	1 267	3,8	1,4
Chambers ..	1 252	10,3	1,4	Nueces	1 042	*	1,2
Dallas	5 412	*	6,0	Orange	5 337	7,5	5,9
El Paso	1 458	*	1,6	Tarrant	2 701	*	3,0
Galveston ..	3 184	1,9	3,5	Travis	1 064	*	1,1
Harris	26 796	1,5	29,2				87,6

* Less than 1%

Source: 1970 U.S. Census of Population, PC (1) — 45, Table 119.

Table 2

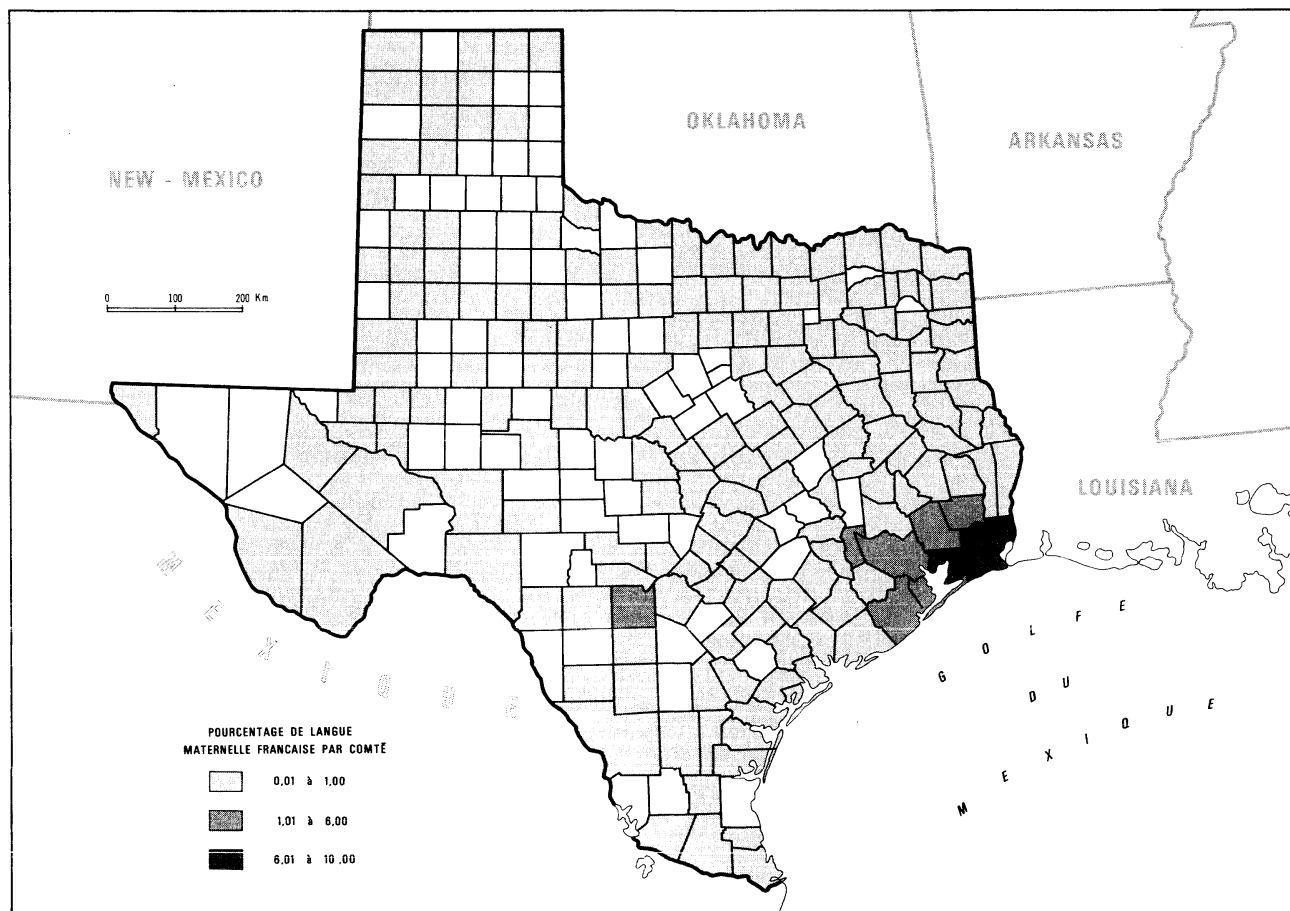
**Texas SMSAs comprising the largest proportion
of French mother tongue population**

	Native born	Foreign born	Native born as % of total SMSA or city population	Native born as % of total native born French mother tongue in Texas
<i>Port Arthur, Orange Beaumont</i>				
SMSA	29 316	70	9,3	34,2
Beaumont	6 932	24	6,0	8,1
Orange	1 742	0	7,1	2,0
Port Arthur	8 097	19	14,1	9,4
Urban balance	9 144	27	11,2	10,7
Rural balance*	3 401	6	9,4	4,0
<i>Galveston-Texas City SMSA</i>	3 125	59	1,8	3,6
Texas City	776	0	2,0	0,9
Galveston	1 298	29	2,1	1,5
Urban balance	685	24	1,3	0,8
Rural balance	366	6	2,1	0,4
<i>Houston SMSA</i>	28 056	1 420	1,4	32,7
Houston	17 814	1 098	1,5	20,8
Pasadena	1 308	12	1,5	1,5
Urban balance	5 831	241	1,3	6,8
Rural balance	3 103	69	1,6	3,6
TOTAL	60 497	1 549	2,5	70,5

* "Rural balance" is a residual category derived from the addition of all sub-totals subtracted from the SMSA total and corresponds to those residing within the SMSA country or counties but in places smaller than 2 500 inhabitants.

Source: 1970 U.S. Census of population, PC (1) — C45, Table 81

POURCENTAGE DE POPULATION DE LANGUE MATERNELLE FRANÇAISE, TEXAS 1970

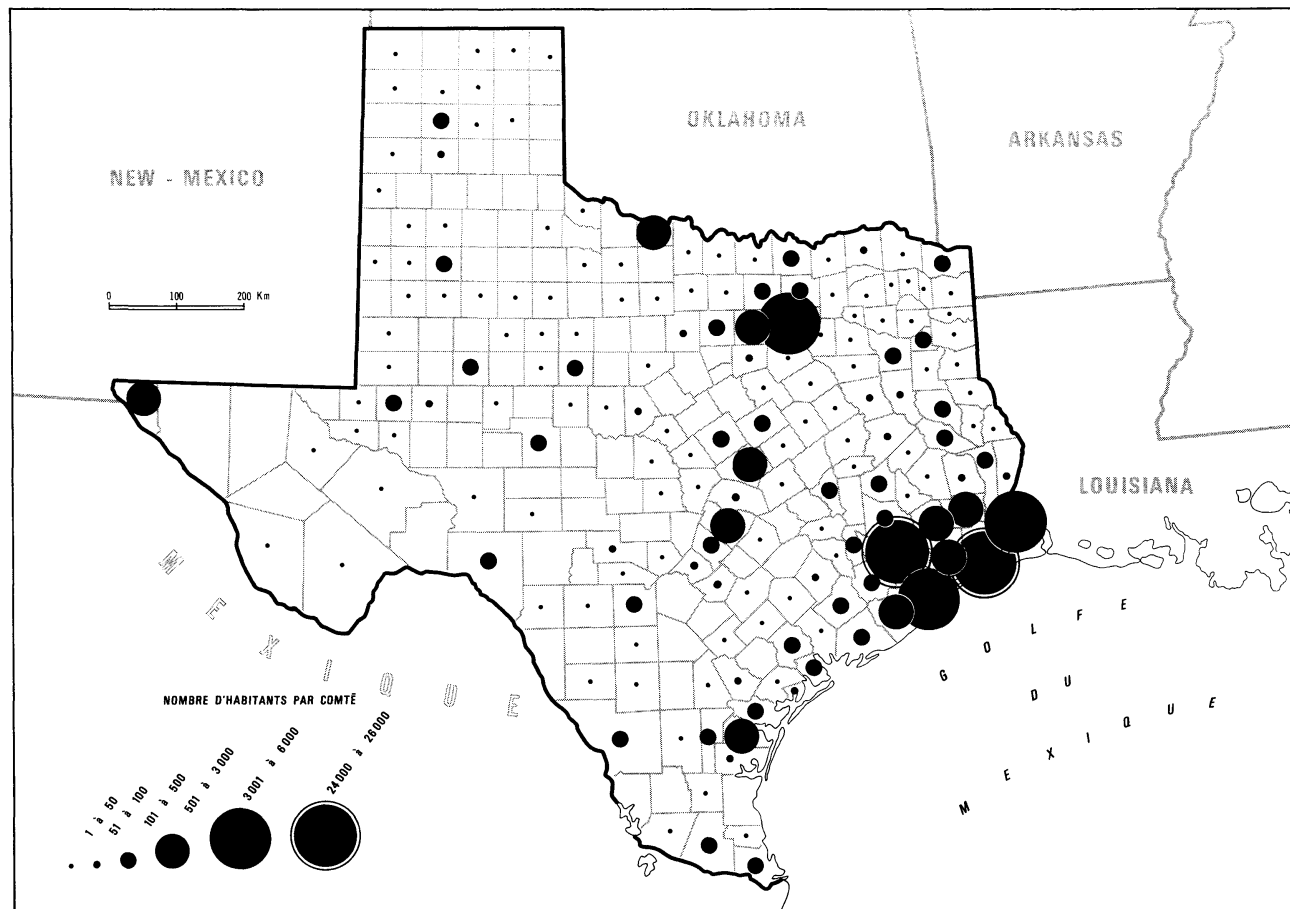


Compilation: Lise Allard, Johanne Gilbert
Réalisation: Andrée Gauthier Lavoie

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population,
General Social and Economic Characteristics, Texas

Figure 1

POPULATION DE LANGUE MATERNELLE FRANÇAISE PAR COMTĒ, TEXAS 1970

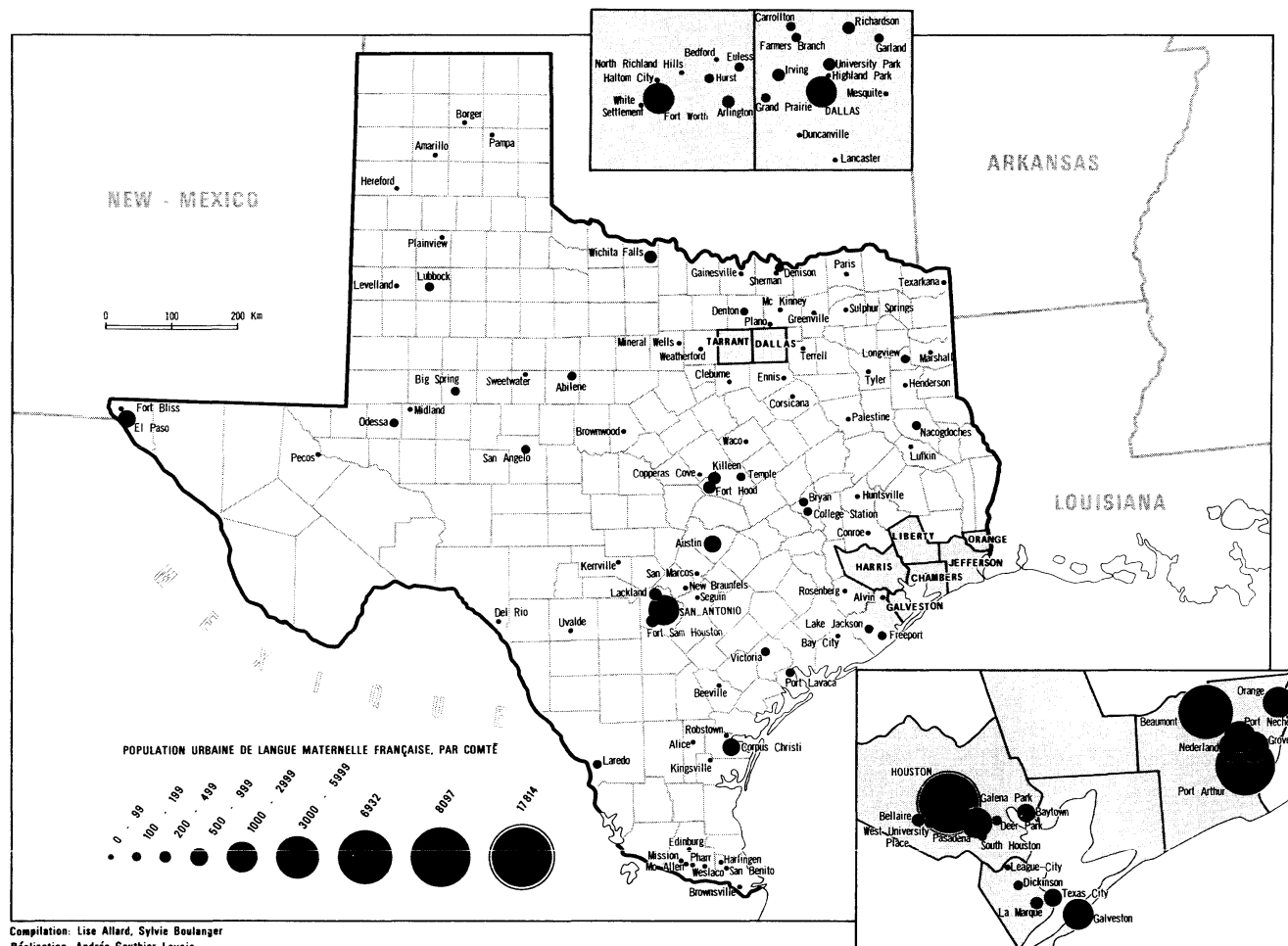


Compilation: Lise Allard, Johanne Gilbert
Réalisation: Andrée Gauthier Lavoie

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population,
General Social and Economic Characteristics, Texas

Figure 2

POPULATION URBAINE DE LANGUE MATERNELLE FRANÇAISE, TEXAS 1970

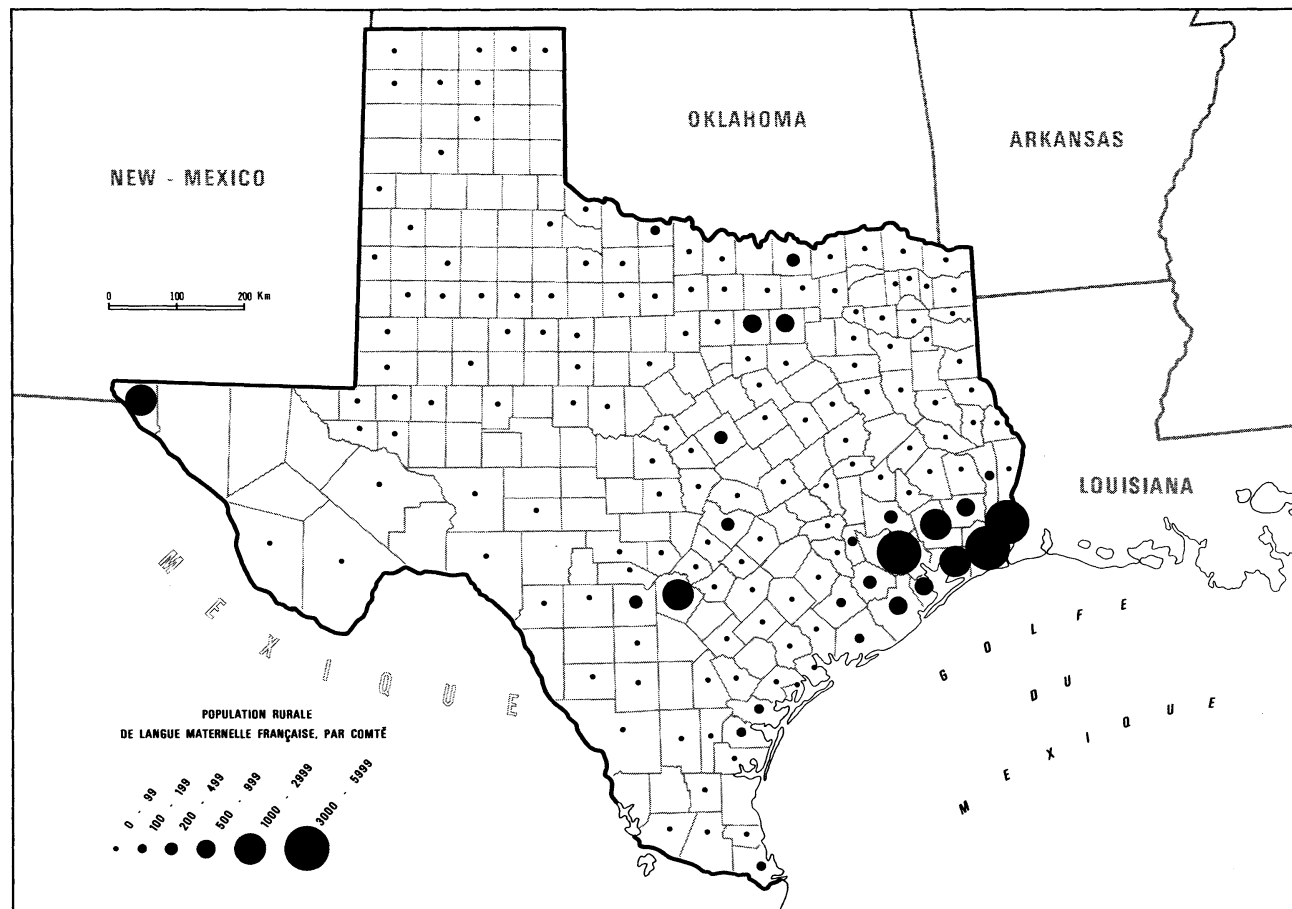


Compilation: Lise Allard, Sylvie Boulanger
Réalisation: Andrée Gauthier Lavoie

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population,
General Social and Economic Characteristics, Texas

Figure 3

POPULATION RURALE DE LANGUE MATERNELLE FRANÇAISE, TEXAS 1970



Compilation: Lise Allard, Sylvie Boulanger
Réalisation: Andrée Gauthier Lavoie

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population,
General Social and Economic Characteristics, Texas

Figure 4

Table 3
French mother tongue population by race, State of Texas, 1970

	Total	White	Black
Native born French mother tongue	85 831	66 945	18 614
Foreign born French mother tongue	5 071	4 938	72
	<i>Urban</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>
Native born French mother tongue	73 976	57 144	16 574
Foreign born French mother tongue	4 747	4 614	442
	<i>Rural</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>
Native born French mother tongue	11 855	9 801	2 040
Foreign born French mother tongue	324	0	0

Given the physical proximity of the Texas French population to Louisiana and the very low proportion of that population which is of foreign origin, it should not be necessary to go into the field to surmise that Texas francophones are predominantly transplanted Louisianans. In fact, like its Bayou state counterpart, the French population of Texas is extremely heterogeneous.⁴ Black francophones according to the 1970 census constitute twenty-two percent of the total native born French mother tongue population of Texas whereas they constitute sixteen percent in Louisiana. The rest are Cajun in origin, coming primarily from the Great Southwest Prairie and almost entirely from that part of south Louisiana west of the Atchafalaya Basin. It is with the Cajuns or Coonasses as they are universally labelled by themselves and others in Texas that the rest of this paper deals.

CAJUN MIGRATION TO TEXAS

The expansion of the Cajun frontier beyond the confines of Louisiana into Texas was a dynamic process born of necessity and opportunity. The earliest Cajuns in living memory to settle in Texas arrived at the turn of the twentieth century and occupied the open prairies west of Beaumont. Many had been "driven" off the land in Louisiana by a land tenure system which dictated the division of land among siblings (West, 1952). Each subsequent division of land created relatively smaller parcels to be handed on to the next generation (Shugg, 1939, p. 8; Post, 1962, p. 77). Thus was produced a class of migratory workers within French Louisiana who frequently became employed by large land holders (*bourgeois* in Cajun French), receiving a "share" for their labours. As exploited agricultural workers, the *habitants'* options were extremely limited: continually seek employment *à la part* with yet another *bourgeois* or *partir pour le grand Texas*. Why Texas? Obviously its nearness to their home in south Louisiana was a major factor. In spite of this relatively short distance, frequently as little as seventy or eighty miles, land prices in Texas were half what they were in Louisiana. A *récolteur* could easily double his acreage by selling at because it was possible to work as day labourers or to rent land, both on a cash basis. A few Cajuns were destined to become large landholders themselves, involved first in cattle, then in rice.

Although some Cajuns of *bourgeois* origins did also cross the Sabine, they were exceptions and so *le Grand Texas* became a promised land—a vast open prairie, open not only in the physical sense, but sociological as well. Here the *habitant* could regain his independence in a relatively more fluid system. Here existed the possibility of being upwardly mobile. Thus, the very earliest migration of Cajuns to Texas, which resulted in

rural settlement along the primary routes heading toward Houston from Beaumont, can be attributed primarily to local conditions in Louisiana, but other events were to shortly increase in dramatic fashion the westward flow of Cajuns.

In 1902 Texaco opened its first east Texas refinery and established a "company town" a few miles northwest of Port Arthur. Cajuns who flocked to the area for jobs were so numerous and the company town so over-run by them that it came to be known Ti-béville (Petite-Abbeville or Little Abbeville after the village in Louisiana of the same name). On one side of the refinery developed Ti-béville and on the other the village of Port Neches which was itself extremely Cajun. People were to arrive in Port Neches via the inter-urban train, having changed trains in Beaumont, or by ferry, crossing the Neches River near the present day Rainbow Bridge. Even though the trek from Louisiana was short it was not always easy and was frequently traumatic. Old-timers recall the experience in vivid detail:

J'ai parti pou' venir icitte à Texas su' le treize décembre. C'était su' un vendredi. J'ai marché. J'ai parti à marche. J'avais pas d'argent, quat'piasses et quèque choge dans mon poche quand j'ai parti pou' venir icitte. J'ai veni icitte su' des *rides*. J'ai arrivé icitte au *ferry* su' le *Neches River*, et ben, quand j'ai traversé bord d'icitte, un boug' a me remassé su' un *grader*. Il couri un *grader* pou' le *county* et il a *drive* icitte à Port Neches. Y'avait juste un chemin du *ferry* jusqu'au venir à Port Neches. Il m'amène jusqu'au icitte dessus un *grader*. Son nom c'était Labe Guidry, un bon homme.

Generally, migration to Texas was based, in large part, on kinship or friendship alliances common to the native Louisiana locale from whence the migrants came. Relatively few isolated individuals were involved, hence extended family and acquaintance networks were established very early, with the resultant effect that Texas became a place of permanent residence from which frequent visits could nevertheless be made to Louisiana.

The early development of the petroleum industry in the Port Arthur area came to a sudden halt in 1915 when a hurricane ravaged the area destroying installations. The rebuilding of the structure damaged combined with the onset of World War I created a large demand for labour. Cajuns, once again, constituted the major component of the labour force.

The first major migration of Cajuns ended at about 1921. A second wave was to develop in the early 1940's. In the interim, a constant trickle was maintained. During the depression years the most marginal of the marginals⁵ made their way to Texas. For the Cajuns who remained in Louisiana there exists a definite image of who were those who left:

Louisiana Cajuns have always considered Texas Cajuns as "*durs*". They (Texas Cajuns) were a bit ill-mannered, had missing teeth and unkempt straggly hair. These were the people who had less than the prairie people who had nothing... (private conversation, Breaux Bridge, La., 1978)

A significant event ushering in the World War II boom and the new movement of Louisiana Cajuns to Texas was the unionization of the refinery workers. The first plant unionized was located in Port Neches and Cajuns, recognizing a class interest, played no small role in the formation of the unions. It was they, along with fellow workers, who negotiated work contracts with *Américain* management and the multi-national corporations. Texas Cajuns boast frequently that without them the oil industry would not be what it is today. In light of their early, continued, and significant contributions, the boast is well-founded.

The war created another massive demand for labour as new industries allied to the burgeoning petroleum industry and the war effort opened their doors. One of the more important of these was the rubber manufacturing industry, Goodyear being the most im-

portant company. Unlike the boom period of World War I in which Cajuns found themselves working primarily along side other Cajuns, the World War II explosion saw an influx of *Américains* to a greater degree than before. Throughout the war Port Arthur was a beehive of naval activity and a home port for the U.S. Merchant Marine which employed many Louisiana Cajuns, although most of these were probably only in Texas temporarily, returning to Louisiana at war's end. The flow of Cajuns to Texas during and for a few years after this period was fed by the constant and progressive mechanization of agriculture in Louisiana which turned people away from the land (see Maguire, 1979) and by the higher salaries available in the secondary and tertiary sectors due, at least in part, to unionization⁶.

In the post-war years and with the development of non-agricultural employment in Louisiana, Cajun migration has, for all intents and purposes, ceased and the Cajuns residing in Texas have diversified their sphere of economic activity as they have adapted to life in a predominantly *américain* milieu and to an economy very different from that which had been known in the south Louisiana. Throughout the entire adaptive process, the awareness of their own unique ethnic identity has persisted.

PERSISTENCE OF CAJUN IDENTITY IN TEXAS

In Texas most Cajuns live in a fairly complex, primarily urban milieu, the ethnic diversity of which is much greater than in Louisiana. They are awash in a sea of Anglo-Protestant values. This can create conflict. It is not rare for a white Texas francophone of Louisiana origin to refer to himself as something other than a Cajun. It seems that Cajun might be a term reserved primarily for those across the river in Louisiana. Rather, he might adopt and use one of an array of names, most of which have been ascribed to him by the dominate American society. A very commonly used label is that of "coonass", also used in Louisiana, but more in jest and much less frequently. Equally current is the shortened version of Coonass, "Coonie" which is almost never heard in French Louisiana, but often heard used in English north Louisiana by anglophones speaking with either contempt or affection of their neighbours to the south. Less frequently employed, but still quite common is just plain "Frenchman" or "Frenchie". Some old-timers who have spent most of their life in Texas may also refer to themselves as "Creole", not to be confused with the old aristocratic Creole class of New Orleans or the so-called Creoles of colour or Black Creoles. This "Creole" connotes simply someone from south Louisiana of French parentage. Never is the often value-laden name "Acadian" used, probably because of the class distinction that has customarily been made between the more educated, well-to-do urban *Acadiens* and the uneducated poor rural *Cadjin* in Louisiana. White Texas francophones are of the latter group.

The traditional markers which have defined Cajun ethnicity in Louisiana have been *language, food, music, and religion*. A fifth could easily be added, *attachment or lack of mobility*. For Texas Cajuns the last and the first are of much less importance, while religion is of greater importance.

With respect to language use, the Texas Cajun youth, as their Louisiana cousins, has opted for English. Nowhere in east Texas can be found passive bilingualism among the youth as is the case in many areas of Louisiana. Rather, passive bilingualism exists more commonly among those well past middle age. On an individual level, Texas Cajuns affirm the French language for symbolic purposes by utilizing it on occasion, but especially by insisting on the proper French pronunciation of their name, even if the spelling has been changed, e.g., Lapointe having become Lapoint.

Clearly from what has been said previously, Texas Cajuns are more "uprooted" than those of Louisiana, otherwise they would probably never have left. Most had moved about many times within Louisiana before coming to Texas. Louisiana Cajuns possess a profound sense of attachment to south Louisiana. They know where "home" is and exhibit little desire to leave, even to temporarily visit relatives in Texas. The visitation patterns between Cajuns of the two states are deeply skewed in favor of Louisiana, i.e., visits take place much more frequently in a west-east direction than in the other. Texas Cajuns tend to feel that in spite of the more favored situation they have acquired since arriving in Texas, life is better in Louisiana: "*Ah, le monde connaît vivre en la Louisiane ! Ils vivent un tas mieux qu'à Texas. Tu vois, icitte dans Texas les Baptistes va essayer te dire quoi faire.*"

Herein lies a problem, one which makes of religion a very important mark of Cajun ethnic identity in Texas. To be Catholic in this part of predominantly Baptist east Texas is very probably to be Cajun. Catholicism permits and even encourages, especially through the church's very active fraternal order, the Knights of Columbus, the *bon temps* ethic. Contrary to many of their conservative Protestant neighbours, Cajuns may drink alcohol, eat plenty of "good" food, dance to music, and gamble—especially on Sunday. Festivals promoting such activities attract huge Sabbath day crowds. These are, of course, frowned on by the Anglo-Protestant population and, where possible, banned by municipal governments. It is clear from this example that elections can take on ethnic and religious overtones. Results are frequently very clearly drawn along religious lines.

Cajun food has maintained its importance in Texas. In fact the proliferation of Cajun restaurants indicates that Cajun food is being adopted by non-Cajuns faster than Cajuns are succumbing to the "national" diet. Domestically, ingredients are not so available as in Louisiana, but specialty stores such as the French Market, a small chain owned by a Cajun, cater to this need.

As for music, on any given weekend Cajun music can be heard and danced to, although not exclusively, in any of a number of night spots such as the Winnie County Club, Sparkle Paradise in Bridge City, or the Rodair Club located on the "Coonass By-Pass" (Highway 365) in Port Acres. Texas Cajun recording artists are active and one in particular, Johnny Janot, hosts a Sunday morning Cajun music programme on station KVLI Beaumont, a station whose listening area covers not only the Golden Triangle, but most of Cajun Louisiana west of the Atchafalaya as well.

Unlike the urban areas of Louisiana where Cajuns have concentrated and, in some cases, form majorities (Westwego, across the Mississippi from New Orleans, for example), three organizations exist in the Golden Triangle, in addition to the Knights of Columbus, to promote aspects of Cajun ethnic identity. All are inter-related, both in purpose and membership. The first of these, the *Cajuns of Tomorrow*, was founded by a professional class and spearheaded by a local Cajun state politician. Its members are generally not French speakers, although Cajuns, and their activities have primarily been directed toward non-Cajuns, i.e., sell Cajunness via the sponsorship of "cultural" activities (festivals). Of the three organizations *Cajuns of Tomorrow* is the best known because it is oldest and has solicited the participation of the regional elite.

The second, the *Golden Triangle Cajun Association* (GTCA), is a splinter group of the former. Its membership and leadership are mostly working class. Its purposes are similar to those of *Cajuns of Tomorrow*, although the GTCA seems to have a stronger commitment to language.

Of the three, it is PREFAM (*Présence francophone Amérique*), however, which is the most dedicated to language. In existence for only three years, PREFAM, in spite of its tiny

membership, seeks to maintain French as a living spoken language and to encourage its use as a written medium. To these ends it has sought the cooperation of a Port Arthur daily newspaper to publish weekly a column in French and enlisted the support of the French Circle, a group of students and professors at Lamar University in Beaumont, the east Texas chapter of the American Association of French Teachers, the *Alliance française* in Houston, and the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) to which it is similar in conception and purpose, but from which it is very different in terms of real or potential political impact. It is highly improbable that PREFAM could ever obtain the official state recognition and financial support in Austin, the state capital, that CODOFIL has procured in Baton Rouge if for no other reason than the dwarf status of the linguistically assimilated French population compared to the huge, vocal, and unassimilated Spanish giant.

It is significant to note that at the organizational or associational level, nothing has been done to merge the racial differences so notable in Texas' French mother tongue population.

CONCLUSION

The generation of Coonasses having been born over the past two decades will decide the impact of the developments described above. The recent historical experience of Texas Cajuns has created a strong ethnic consciousness. It has also reinforced and, in some cases, created a strong class and occupational consciousness which are reflected in ability to speak French. Ability to speak French is, of course, greatest among rural Texas Cajuns. Generally, among Cajuns over forty years of age residing in the Golden Triangle, those who turned away from the industrial complexes, perceiving them as a new form of "bourgeois" exploitation, have maintained to a higher degree their linguistic competence in French. Those who have not consider themselves no less Cajun or "Coonie", identifying along other markers. The new generation, English Texas Cajuns, with no personal recollection of the reasons which resulted in their being in Texas and no immigration from Louisiana to remind them of their roots there, must seek new means of asserting an ethnic identity if a Cajun identity is to survive in east Texas. Cajun culture has always shown the ability to deal creatively with change yet maintain key features of its essence. To do so in the years to come in Texas will be miraculous indeed.

NOTES

¹ The authors wish to thank the following people who compiled the data for the maps in this work: Lise Allard, Sylvie Boulanger, and Johanne Gilbert.

² It goes without saying that the vast majority of the French speaking population is also English speaking. In most cases French speakers, especially younger ones, are probably more at ease speaking English. Data presented here are gleaned from published census materials dealing with mother tongue. Many more people are undoubtedly ethnically French than is reflected in the figures. At the scale of Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas and Places of 50 000 or more, the census makes a distinction between "native born" and "foreign" mother tongue. This useful distinction has not been preserved in the published data for smaller places and counties however.

³ It is probable that census figures dealing with French language are grossly deflated. Owing to the stigma traditionally associated with being of French origin, many respondents likely refused to declare French as their mother tongue when indeed it was. In Port Neches, for example, a city where, according to the census, one person in ten is French mother tongue, more than ten percent of the names in the Port Neches telephone directory are French or of French derivation.

⁴ The French population of Louisiana is composed not only of descendants of Acadian refugees deported from Nova Scotia by the British in 1755, commonly called Cajuns, but also numerous English, German, and Spanish groups, who have assimilated as Cajuns. In addition, there are the descendants of the original French settlers in New Orleans and elsewhere, and those Frenchmen coming to Louisiana during the slave rebellion in Haiti. To these must be added the descendants of French

speaking slaves, *gens de couleur* (mixed race) and American Indians. Since the U.S. census only allows for a black-white category, *gens de couleur* become *black* and Indians probably white.

⁵ Many Louisiana Cajuns, especially those east of the Atchafalaya Basin in Bayou Lafourche, maintain that they suffered very little during the depression because they were self-sufficient, independent of the American economic system.

⁶ A barber who came to Texas in 1951 from Broussard, Louisiana received four times as much for a haircut by crossing the state line.

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